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ABSTRACT

Although the apparent audiences of the news media are quite large, the real audience for news, in particular hard news of politics and public affairs, is much smaller than is commonly assumed. This situation, while antithetical to the democratic ideal of a news-hungry, well-informed electorate, in practice makes little difference in the way the political system in the United States really operates. The individual citizen/media consumer consciously or unconsciously realizes the futility of being well-informed politically and therefore uses news for more diffuse personal needs: in those areas of his or her life where information can make a difference, the individual may truly be well-informed. All of this makes little difference to the economic health of the news media, who can and do survive by creating saleable audiences for advertisers through a variety of means. However, a potential danger is created when the audience for hard news is small. Slowly-developing little-noticed trends can explode into dramatic crises, thus shaking confidence in the media and other institutions when instant solutions to problems are not forthcoming. The final consequence can be a society where the dual illusions of popular sovereignty and of a well-informed electorate combine to create great potential for social-political chaos--even anarchy. (Author/FL)

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HOW MUCH NEWS IS ENOUGH?

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How Much News is Enough?

Few would challenge the assertion that the volume of news and information available to society through the mass media has increased enormously in recent years. It cannot be assumed, however, that this has led to a commensurate increase in knowledge of public affairs, nor that democratic government works the better for it.

In fact, it could be argued--and it is the thesis of this paper--that despite the increase, most Americans can and do get by without absorbing much news (as traditionally defined), and that meanwhile the political system, like Old Man River, "just keeps rolling along"--carried in part by sheer inertia and in part by the exercise of real power by others who are not affected by decisions made in the voting booth. Furthermore, this situation need not affect the economic health of the news media, who can thrive by providing saleable audiences to advertisers, no matter what content is used to create such audiences.

Specifically, it will be argued that the real audience for news is less than is commonly assumed; that this makes little real difference insofar as the operant political system is concerned; that news is multi-functional and provides gratifications which are in addition to (and may be more important than) political values for individuals; that the news media make dysfunctional

as well as functional contributions to systemic and individual needs without endangering their profit margins; but that the net effect may be to weaken the confidence of the public in all its social institutions.

How much news is enough? Apparently a little goes a long way. Let's see why that is the case, first by looking at the real audience for news (Part I), and then looking at the consequences for the political system, the individual citizen-media consumer, and the news media themselves (Part II). Some possible implications will be discussed in Part III.

I. THE REAL AUDIENCE FOR NEWS

A distinction must be made between the potential or apparent audience for news, and the actual audience. The former involves raw numbers--circulation figures, broadcast ratings, time spent with the media, etc. On the surface, these numbers are large and comforting; they suggest an enormous potential audience for news. Upon closer inspection, the data become less impressive.

The real audience for news is a function of not only what is offered by the media, but what actually is consumed. Looking at the three primary news media, television, newspapers and radio, what are the potential as well as the actual audiences for news?

A. Television. If the Roper polls are to be believed, television is the major source of news for most Americans. The raw numbers look good: about 98% of all homes have at least one set; there are about 74 million such homes; the average home is tuned in more than six hours per day; the average person watches more than three hours per day.[1]

Viewers ostensibly can witness two or three hours of news each weekday. Although the networks have their major news shows of half-hour duration in the early evening, they also offer news on early morning shows, and one network--ABC--has started offering a late evening news program on a regular basis. Local stations have half-hour news shows in the early evening and late evening; some offer two half-hours of early evening news; some offer news at noon.

But what is the real audience for television news? Looking first at the ratings (which deal with TV homes, not individuals), we find that the combined ratings of the network evening newscasts have reached about 40.[2] Thus, putting the data in the best light possible, about 60% of all television homes are not tuned in to the nation's major news source on a given day--and that is during the regular TV season. During the summer re-run season, when all viewing drops off considerably, the combined network ratings often fall below 30, which means 70% of homes are not tuned in.[3]

If we look at individual viewing rather than homes, the figures become even more interesting. Only about 25% of adults watch the network evening news shows, combined.[4] An additional 4-6% watch an early morning newscast. Combining all newscasts, network and local, 48-52% of adults watch <u>some</u> television news on the average weekday.[5] In short, about half of the American people do not watch their No. 1 news source at all on a given day.

Since viewers can only see and hear what is offered, let's carry the analysis further. On a typical half-hour newscast there really is about 22 minutes of news. This permits 20-30 stories maximum, each averaging a minute or less; in the case of local

newscasts this includes weather and sports items, which must be subtracted from the hard news. Set in type, these 22 minutes would fill less than two newspaper columns. (An "in-depth" story might run as long as two or three minutes; beyond that, there has to be a "multi-part series." Network newscasts tend to be more tightly written than local newscasts where, following the dicta of the consultants, "warm" and "personable" newscasters further dilute the actual content with informal chit-chat and teasers.

At a still deeper level of analysis there is the question of retention--the final stage of the process. The evidence suggests that recall of TV news is quite low. One study, for example, found that after being exposed to newscasts containing 14-15 stories, viewers could recall only two items on the average an hour or so later--despite having been reminded ahead of time that they would be participating in the study. About 20% could not remember a single item.[6] Still another study found that 51% of respondents could not recall even one story from a network newscast seen earlier the same evening; the average recall for all respondents was one story per newscast.[7] The implications of this low level of recall are discussed later, on page 22 of this paper, but the point seems to be this: most people don't watch much news on television, despite its being the No. 1 medium for news, and they don't retain much of what little they see.

B. Newspapers. Surely there must be more grounds for optimism if we look at daily newspapers, the traditional bread-and-butter news media which until the mid-'60s ranked No. 1 with audiences.

Not necessarily.

Again, at first glance the raw figures look encouraging. Daily newspaper circulation is nearly 62 million; readership, it is alleged, is 130 million daily; about 7 in 10 adults read a newspaper regularly.[8] With a second glance, the picture becomes more clouded. Newspaper circulation has lagged behind population growth. The boom in circulation which was predicted when the war babies formed new households has been a modest pop instead; younger cohorts are not reading newspapers to the same degree their parents do. Newspapers have poor penetration among other segments of the population, such as blacks in urban ghettos. The average number of newspapers taken per household has declined from 1.36 in 1910 to .93 in 1973.[9] Little wonder: in 88% of the 1,551 daily newspaper cities in America there is only one newspaper in town; only 31 cities have competing dailies.[10]

There is a documented decrease in readership among virtually every age cohort; on a per-capita basis, estimated readership has declined from 85% in 1947 to 63% in 1977.[11] Coincident with this decline (and possibly contributing to it) has been the irony that while the average level of formal education is higher than ever, functional illiteracy may be increasing as well. The estimates vary, depending on operational definitions, but some sources estimate than 18.5 million adults are functionally illiterate.[12] That hardly contributes to the potential for newspaper audiences.

Meanwhile the volume of news available in newspapers has grown. The average edition size has more than doubled in the last three decades, and that includes news pages as well as advertising.[13]

On the one hand it is true that newspapers are publishing more news of all kinds, and in greater depth; on the other hand there is a good deal of content which is not news in the traditional sense: soft features, personality pieces, self-improvement and other "utility" items, plus an inordinate amount of puffery in the business, food, travel, entertainment and real estate sections. This is most pronounced in afternoon papers (which outnumber morning papers 4 to 1).[14]

Yet time spent reading this increased volume of news is not increasing. The average reading time has remained about 30 minutes a day for many years. In fact, the average item has a readership of 24%; put in negative terms, the odds are about 3 to 1 that the average item will not be read.[15] Readership of some kinds of hard news (e.g., news of government, business and finance) is higher than average; other kinds of hard news (e.g., international news, news about social problems, labor, wages, taxes, the environment) receive lower than average readership. Sports items are the most widely read, by far.[16]

Given the increase in leisure time in American society, the higher levels of formal education, the increase in discretionary income, and a newly-found marketing philosophy by newspaper management, one might expect higher levels of newspaper reading today. Instead, the reverse is true.

C. Radio. Raw numbers, again, are impressive. Radio is the most saturated of all the mass media, reaching 99% of all homes. There are 425 million radio sets in America. The average family has six receivers, and tunes in about 3½ hours per day.[17]

There are far more radio stations than daily newspapers and television stations combined. Listeners in large cities usually can choose from a dozen or more stations. But the volume of news on radio is not very impressive. Radio news--so popular in the halcyon years of the '30s and '40s--is but a shadow of its former self. True, there are about a hundred stations which have an all-news format, and there are numerous stations which do a good job of covering local news with limited budgets. But the great majority of stations rely on short summaries of the news (five minutes or less) on the hour or half-hour, using rip-and-read wire service copy or relying on network feeds.

This lack of emphasis on news is reflected in the public's low perception of radio as a news medium. Roper, for example, reports that today fewer than 20% of adults list radio as their major source of news. In 1959 it was as high as 34%, but the figure has declined steadily since then.[18]

Therefore, if we look behind the surface statistics of the three primary news media, we find that the actual consumption of news is fairly low. That is the picture for the news audience in general; if it were possible to separate the consumption of hard news of public affairs from other types, undoubtedly the picture would be even more depressing.

The level of public knowledge and awareness provides other indirect evidence that the audience for news is small. (It is indirect evidence because other factors might be involved.) Many polls and surveys document this, but a few examples should suffice.

A 1979 CBS-New York Times poll showed that 62% of Americans did not know which two countries were involved with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)--the United States and Russia.[19] A well-known Gallup poll showed that most Americans did not know who their Congressman was, nor whether he was a Democrat or a Republican, nor how he had voted on any issue. Still another Gallup poll in 1977 showed that half of all Americans did not know that this country has to import oil to meet its energy needs.[20]

Few people who have studied the subject doubt that when it comes to public affairs, the information holding of most people is quite low.

In addition to the empirical evidence, there is ample theory to explain why this situation can exist--despite ample media coverage. For example, Schramm has told us that selective exposure, perception and retention operate to mediate the flow of news and media influence; his "fraction of selection" is a useful if not precise explanation of the confluence of factors which operate in the selection of media messages. A substantial body of "Uses and Gratifications" theory shows that media audiences are not sponges which automatically absorb all content available, but rather that the audience is an active one where individuals choose content which meets individual needs and wants. Festinger has given us his theory of cognitive dissonance, which suggests that individuals tend to avoid anxiety-producing messages.

Many factors undoubtedly are involved in explaining why the audience for news is as small as it is. Several will be discussed later in this paper, but one factor which may have application at this point concerns the confidence people have in the news media. Various polls on this subject have been taken. The results differ somewhat because different time periods were involved and because questions were posed in different ways. In 1978 Harris found that only 23% of Americans expressed "a great deal of confidence" in the press (i.e., newspapers), and 35% felt that way about TV news.[21] A Gallup poll in 1979 reported that 51% said they had either "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in newspapers as institutions, and 38% expressed similar feelings about television.[22] The most optimistic interpretation of these data indicates that half--and maybe more--of the people do not have much confidence in the two major news media. Newspaper and TV people can argue among themselves as to who is more credible and who is No. 1, but none of them have much to brag about. Could this low level of public confidence explain, in part, the low news audience?

If the real audience for news is smaller than the raw audience statistics indicate, the next question becomes: so what? What difference does it make?

II. THE REAL NEED FOR NEWS

Let's examine that question from the standpoint of the three major parties involved: (A) the political system, (B) the individual citizen-media consumer, and (C) the news media themselves.

A. Systemic Need. Traditionally, and in theory, democratic government rests on certain basic assumptions. Among these are that citizens will be well-informed, that they will participate actively in the political process, and that their decisions will determine (or at least be influential in determining) public policy. Enlightened public opinion is the cornerstone of democracy. Certainly that is what our 8th Grade civics course taught us, but the assumptions of the democratic model have been called into question by numerous scholars.

We have argued already that the first assumption is not met very well; the audience for news and the level of knowledge both are fairly low--lower than is called for in the ideal model.

As for active participation, well, the figures are revealing. Only 70% of the people who technically are eligible to register to vote actually are registered; for young people 18-24, the figure is 44%, the lowest of any sub-segment of the population; and of the 70% which are registered, only 80-85% will actually vote, according to George Gallup.[23]

In recent presidential elections the percentage of eligible voters actually casting ballots has declined from 64% in 1960, to 54% in 1976. In off-year Congressional elections the percentage has been even lower. At the state and local levels, voter turnout varies greatly; tax and bond issue elections usually attract few voters; with hot issues and charismatic candidates the turnout may be higher, but in general the Founding Fathers would not be pleased with the low levels of voter participation.

A paradox worth noting is that among blacks and young people, voting turnout is lower than the average, despite the fact that their enfranchisement came about after no small amount of pressure and social agitation. What is even more revealing is that it is precisely these segments of the population which exhibit the lowest appetite for news.

Maybe part of the explanation involves the third assumption of the democratic model--that voters exert an important influence on public policy and decision-making. Let's be clear here: what we are talking about is how the political system really operates. Most of the decisions which truly affect the body politic, those which impact most directly on the lives of average citizens, are not made as pure democratic theory would assert. That is, they are not made in the voting booth.

In the first place, there is too much confusion about our true form of government. At one level of analysis, it is a constitutional democracy, not a pure democracy; at another level of analysis, it is a republican form of government, which means citizens elect representatives to make decisions and carry out public policy. Voting is infrequent behavior, even under ideal theory; it takes place maybe once a year on the average. Meanwhile the system must go on; thousands of decisions must be made daily which citizens cannot make, nor should they make, because they lack both the time and the expertise.

At best, voting permits citizen participation in a very limited and narrow range of decisions. It involves: (a) choosing representatives on the basis of past performance or future promises or

charisma--which often is the case--and/or (b) granting or withholding approval for proposed actions of a very specific nature, e.g., in a referendum. These infrequent voting decisions are but a tiny fraction of the total number made within the political system.

Once elected from a narrow range of choices, representatives are free to ignore promises and campaign platforms. Except for a very few controversial issues, they know full well that most people don't know and don't care how they vote on the hundreds of pieces of legislation they will pass judgment on. The system neither requires extensive citizen participation, nor permits it. As Walter Lippmann has said:

> We must assume that a public is inexpert in its curiosity, intermittent, that it discerns only gross distinctions, is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted; that since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as conflict. The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece.[24]

Beyond the limited control of their destiny permitted by using the voting booth, most citizens know that their elected representatives exercise less real power than many other groups in society. Representative government in many cases has less power than unelected bureaucrats and political appointees, than powerful labor unions, than giant conglomerates and multi-national corporations, than organized crime, than pressure groups (which, more and more, are one-issue oriented), and yes, even than the mass media.

The truth is that both democratic and totalitarian systems can maintain themselves without an active, well-informed citizenry.

In fact, efficiency and convenience and order and stability all argue against the idea.

The viability of any political system does not depend on the conformity of theory/ideology to practice. Both the United States and the Soviet Union are clear examples. Totalitarian systems need have no theoretical nor ideological basis (although they may); they can be maintained through raw power, but even then such regimes gradually assume a legitimacy and acceptance. Political systems run on sheer inertia as much as anything else, and in the case of democracies this is supplemented by maintaining the illusion of popular sovereignty. The only requirement is that all the parties concerned must pretend that it is not an illusion.

Central to the democratic illusion is the notion that public opinion will operate in some marvelous and powerful way. In reality, public opinion merely is mysterious, sometimes interesting, rarely efficacious. As Jacques Ellul has pointed out, public opinion is more of a fad than the product of serious judgment or conscious discussion of facts; it does not generate responsible political perspectives, but instead creates an aura of size and urgency.[25] Or as Lippmann has said:

> There is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorance in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs.[26]

But what is the role of the news media in the functioning of the democratic system? Absolutely essential, some would argue. Based on the existing research literature it is clear that the media play several roles, but the contributions are mixed blessings.

The most obvious contribution the news media could make would be to increase the level of information holding of citizens. Here the research is far from conclusive. Much of the literature involves studies which find an association between media exposure and information holding, but without specifying which variable is causal.[27] Other studies indicate differential effects of various media.[28] Some research points to positive effects,[29] some to negative effects.[30] Intervening variables well may be involved, such as level of coverage and scope of issues.[31] There is some evidence which suggests that the media may contribute to a greater gap in information holding between informed elites and sub-elites.[32] More research is needed with better controls before the final word can be said about this media role.

A second way the media could contribute to the political system would be to stimulate participation or voter turnout. The evidence for such a mobilizing effect again is mixed. While Blumler and McLeod argue that turnout should be affected strongly by exposure to campaign information,[33] Palmgreen adds a note of caution:

> ...although it is recognized that mass media exposure may under certain conditions influence a person to vote, it seems likely on both theoretical and empirical grounds that the reverse causal sequence can account for the greater portion of any observed association between voting...and mass media exposure...[34]

Others have postulated that media exposure may be an intervening variable in voting, rather than a causal factor. Olsen, for instance, argues that participation in voluntary associations is the initial mobilizing influence. He says such groups bring individuals into contact with issues, actors and affairs; this

leads to media exposure, political interest and party preference. "All these factors then combine to propel individuals to the polls."[35]

The checkered report card for the media gets no better if we look at other alleged influences.

Consider the question of political partisanship and its relation to media usage. There is a documented increase in the number of persons who deny allegiance to any political party. About one-third of the voters are neither Democrats nor Republicans. Party discipline seems to be breaking down. Although we have had a Democratic majority in Congress and a Democratic President, administration-sponsored legislation has had rough sledding in recent years. There also is evidence that party influence is not as strong as it once was in the traditional nominating and electing processes. Party labels have come to mean less and less. Some students of the subject see the media, especially television, as a major reason for this decline in partisanship. O'Keefe,[36] Ziemke and Luetscher[37] have provided some evidence to that effect.

There can be little doubt that television has revolutionized political campaigning in America. Candidates may not need political parties, but they need television to get elected. In that sense McLuhan is right: the medium IS the message. Issue-oriented Party Politics has given way to Personality Politics. Commercial duplicity, characterized by media blitzes of slick 30-second spots replete with fuzzy images, is complemented by news coverage complicity.

Campaign coverage by the media has turned politics into a spectator sport. It is shallow and superficial, focusing on personalities rather than issues. The media define success and failure, not the voters, nor the candidates themselves. Media-defined front-runners are fawned over; candidates with asterisks in the polls are ignored. An entire campaign may turn on a single TV interview, or on a trivial mistake and offhand remark which is trumpeted as a cosmic event.

In the process, the cost of campaigning is driven to alarming levels. Poor, unphotogenic, born-in-a-cabin rail-splitters with squeaky voices need not apply. To raise the enormous funds required, deals must be struck and promises made. None of these effects are particularly salubrious to the political system.

But there may be an even more disquieting and broader effect, the effect the news media have on the legitimacy of the political system itself. No one questions the need for reliable news and information in a democracy, but news--as presented in the media--can be both functional and dysfunctional. This dual influence is recognized by Kurt and Gladys Lang, who say that while the mass media do contribute to structuring a real political environment and a non-local reality over the long term, they also may weaken faith in political life. "Such distrust," they say, "is not primarily a mark of sophistication, indicating that critical 'discount' is at work; it is of a projective character and constitutes a defensive reaction against the periodic political crises known to affect a person's destiny as well as against what are defined as deliberate efforts to mobilize political sentiment."[38]

In explaining why and how, they add:

> The answers must be sought in the way in which the mass media tend to emphasize crisis and stress it in lieu of the normal processes of decision-making. Such distrust has its roots in the complexity of events and of problems in which the mass audience is involved. For instance, since viewers bring little specialized knowledge to politics, even full TV coverage of major political events does not allay this distrust. In fact, it may abet it.[39]

Patterson and McClure are even more emphatic. They say: "Television's only effect on the American voter is to cheapen his conception of the campaign process and to stuff his head full of nonsense and trivia."[40]

Weakened faith in the system also results from the media's constant harping on the faults of political leaders and institutions. Some would argue that such is the nature of news, and that the Adversary Relationship dictates this. But if the function of the press is "to paint a picture of reality that men can act upon," as Lippmann says, this picture must be accurate, fully reflective of the bad and the good; the mirror must not reflect a partial, distorted image.

Feigert offers some empirical confirmation that the nature of news and its treatment can have both positive and negative effects. In a five-country comparison of media usage and political competence, he found that citizens who follow public affairs in the mass media are provided with some means of participation in the political system. He also found that since politics as presented by the media is governed by an inherent news bias--focusing on high drama--this contributes to a sense of apathy and alienation, thus depriving the system of its legitimacy.[41]

Michael Robinson advances an argument which potentially is devastating. He says we have witnessed the slow and steady decline of two basic political commodities--belief in the worth and appropriateness of our governmental structures, and belief in our own capacity to know and understand politics.[42] He attributes this decline to the rise of electronic journalism, specifically to 1956 when the Huntley-Brinkley Report began, and especially to 1963 when the networks developed the 30-minute news program.[43]

At first he thought that "television news, with its 'liberal' bias, simply and mechanistically moved the society toward the left"; later he concluded that "the principal effect is not political liberalization; it is instead, political frustration--political malaise."[44] He says:

> My recent work with television has forced me to build a yet untested theory concerning the growth of political illegitimacy. I have begun to envision a two-stage process in which television journalism, with its constant emphasis on social and political conflict, its high credibility, its powerful audio-visual capabilities and its epidemicity, has caused the more vulnerable viewers first to doubt their own understanding of their political system...But once these individuals have passed this initial stage they enter a second phase in which personal denigration continues and in which a new hostility toward politics and government also emerges. Having passed through both stages of political cynicism, these uniquely susceptible individuals pass their cynicism along to those who were, at the start, less attuned to television messages and consequently less directly vulnerable to televisual malaise.[45]

Television has created a new kind of news audience, Robinson says, the "Inadvertent Audience," which he defines as "that large, amorphous portion within the Mass Audience, that portion which will <u>not read</u> the news of the day but which is willing <u>to listen to</u> or <u>watch</u> the news if the listening or watching is entertaining."[46]

By dealing directly with the Mass Audience and the Inadvertent Audience, Robinson says television has negated the 2-step flow, which "has dried to a trickle." By circumventing opinion leaders, television "thus subverts another source of mediation between the source and the target, another self-regulating mechanism."[47] (Presumably this would include political party officials and party machinery in general.)

Robinson's thesis is controversial, to be sure, but it is one which merits examination. It is part of a general pattern of evidence which suggests that the news media, despite their potential value and even necessity, may contribute dysfunctionally to the political system.

B. Individual Need. If news has, at best, mixed value for the political system, what can be said about its consequences for the individual citizen-media consumer? First it is necessary to consider what the real need is for news and information--keeping in mind the difference between needs and wants--and then we must consider how well the news media provide for both.

To survive, to cope, in today's complex, functionally interdependent world, the individual must wrestle with a growing need for, and a growing flood of, news and information. He needs to know so many things. Yet the time available for absorbing news tends to be inelastic. True, leisure time has increased--but so has the range of options for spending this time.

It may be useful to think in terms of a "Need Equation" which is non-mathematical but which identifies and focuses on parts of the total need. Roughly, this might be expressed as follows:

TOTAL INFORMATION NEED = GENERAL NEED + UNIQUE NEED

General Need refers to the common core of information needed by all citizens, i.e., news of public affairs--the minimum information assumed by democratic theory for people to vote intelligently and otherwise to perform their civic duty.

Unique Need, as the term suggests, can and does vary greatly for different individuals. Subsumed under it would be several kinds of information, such as that required for particular persons to practice their vocation or profession, to exercise their avocations and interests, to make intelligent consumption decisions in the marketplace, to develop and maintain satisfactory self-images, etc.

A distinction between different kinds of needs is required if we are to answer two questions: what does it mean to be "well-informed," and what difference does being well-informed make?

Being well-informed surely must entail more than merely knowing specific facts, which in themselves rarely are consequential. Much of the research on information holding stops there, nevertheless. Is it not more important that individuals be able to relate one fact to another, to see relationships and patterns of meaning? In short, is not <u>understanding</u> really the bottom line? To know what the letters "ERA" and "SALT" stand for is one thing; to understand the implications and the relationships to other areas of concern is quite another. Watching quiz and game shows on television can result in the acquisition of specific facts, but there is no evidence that this contributes to understanding. Might not the same be said of much of the news we read, see and hear?

As a rule, when studies are made on information holding the focus is on matters related to the General Need, i.e., public affairs. As we have seen, most of the findings are not encouraging from the standpoint of popular democratic theory. But people can be well-informed about some things and not others. Again, Uses and Gratifications theory tells us that people absorb news selectively; they choose media content which meets their needs. But which needs? Maybe the answer lies in extending the theory further to say: people choose and absorb that content which is useful in those areas of life where they feel that they can exert some degree of influence or control over their own destiny.

Given this conceptualization, we can perhaps understand why the level of information holding--as well as understanding--of public affairs is so low. What incentive is there to be well-informed politically? To vote? The citizen who feels a vague sense of civic responsibility can meet his cultural expectation of being informed by catching a few snatches of radio and TV news, or by occasionally scanning a newspaper--especially just before election time. But he knows, deep down, that his participation in the political system is limited and futile; that the significant decisions which will affect "the way things are" will be made outside the voting booth; and that even so, the vote of one well-informed citizen counts no more than the vote of one ill-informed idiot.

In short, being well-informed politically is not worth the effort required to gain true understanding. Consequently, that part of the General Need is given short shrift, or more precisely, a redefinition takes place: it is enough that the individual has

"a general impression" of what is going on in the world of public affairs...a world view where specific issues and events are collapsed into a vague, fuzzy, ephemeral feeling that things are going well, or they or not. Is this not precisely what the empirical evidence shows? Isn't this related to the documented low recall of television news, referred to earlier in the paper? And isn't this general impression enhanced when Uncle Walter tells us each evening: "...and that's the way it is..."?

Having disposed quickly of his General Need, the individual can devote most of his media time budget to his Unique Needs--acquiring news and information where his information holding can make a real difference: on his job, with his hobbies, with his personal growth and fulfillment, with his pursuit of the Good Life. In these areas, his information holding may be quite high, and he may truly be well-informed.

There is a good deal of indirect support for a perspective such as has been suggested. For instance, the concept of "privatization" is not new; by this is meant a turning aside from public participation to one's private world where more control can be exerted. Les Moeller says that privatization can be one of several dysfunctions of news; other effects can be heightened apathy or even anxiety.[48]

This latter point has been extended by Michael Kirkhorn, who says journalism has become "a guide to uncreative worrying"; he writes:

> The expulsion of Adam and Eve taught mankind to worry. The daily press provides the topics. Regularly, punctually, monotonously, our newspapers and radio and television stations relay listings of hazards, disasters, misdoings and undoings. Helplessly drawn to any dramatic situation, unanalytical, accomplices in the zones of thought, journalists accumulate all kinds of bad ideas. They propagate notions which they poorly understand and discard those they assume others may misunderstand or refuse to tolerate. Preoccupied with the performances of individuals occupying official positions, journalists ignore the background. They see the spider, not the web. Relentlessly practical, they distrust dreamers, visionaries and utopians. They point us toward no detours but diligently cover our collisions.[49]

This feeling is shared by some other journalists. Charles Kuralt, whose "On the Road" travels for CBS has carried him to America's heartland perhaps more than any other reporter, says that "journalism, by its nature, is crisis-ridden: the country, by its nature, really is not."[50]

Satisfying the General Need can be traumatic for the individual at times; satisfying the Unique Need is less so. But surely all the blame does not rest with the media, and surely there are individuals who revel in sensational news and who take a positive delight in being a voyeur to the unhappiness and despair of others. Media audiences are not homogenic. It is hard for the media to be all things to all people. For instance there are some news consumers who don't want any bad news, preferring a chamber of commerce approach, or if not that a sanitized version where the real world is stripped of its four-letter words and bloody horror. Happy Talk formats do work fine.

Yet the feeling persists that the media contribute to the general malaise. Some critics argue that the news being provided by the media today is simply irrelevant (at least in terms of traditionally postulated utility; more on this later).

Max Ways, for example, laments the fact that there is a "journalistic artistic bias" in the sense that journalists tend to define news as easily-reportable, concrete events. This prevents them from reporting trends and changes which occur more slowly but which are more important. The trouble with the news, he says, is that it isn't newsy enough.[51] Other critics have complained that on television, visual values often outweigh real news values. You gotta have something to show, man! And no Talking Heads.

It is true that there is a certain sameness to the news over time. A person who takes a few weeks leave from media exposure, say a vacation in the wilderness, can return and find that he has missed little. There are the usual, routine stories; only the names and places change. A plane has crashed somewhere; there was a fire; somebody murdered his wife; inflation is still rampant; a corrupt politician has been exposed; etc., etc., etc. So what else is new? After a while most of the "news" becomes a case of deja vu: we have seen it all before. In short, much of the news is so expected, so predictable, that it really isn't news.

That is not to say, however, that it cannot and does have utility, but it is not the utility usually postulated. There is a growing awareness that all media content is multi-functional. Advertising, whose primary function is to persuade, also provides news; it can be entertaining as well. Entertainment shows on TV also can inform and educate and provide guidance. Therefore news can provide utility which is in addition to--or different from--that informing function traditionally ascribed to it.

Empirical evidence for such an assertion is offered by Mark Levy. In his study of the audience experience with television news, he found that one gratification did, indeed, involve a news or surveillance function, but the experience also provided other utility--reassurance ("Well, no war today"), diversion, entertainment, para-social interaction, vicarious participation, and raw materials for sociability or conversation. Then, he says, there are some people who watch the news on TV "because, like Mt. Everest, it is there." [52]

(Yes, indeed; even a test pattern probably would generate a rating of 10--maybe 15 if it were animated and used psychedelic colors.)

William Stephenson extends the multi-functional nature of news even further with his "play theory of mass communication." Stephenson does not deny that the mass media have an information function, but he says this "is only an interlude in the almost full-time function of the media in general, and of the press in particular, to entertain audiences." [53] Rather than denigrating the entertainment function, however, he sees it as a highly developed form of subjective play which creates possibilities for new aspects of Self to arise. Concerning the communication-pleasure associated with reading a newspaper, for instance, he says:

> Newspaper reading, subjectively regarded, has all the earmarks of play. One reads one thing at one moment, and another at the next moment, with no relation between them. Reading a newspaper is voluntary, that is, it is not a task or duty (emphasis this author...my notion of the General Need implies a citizenship duty). It is not related to the person's everyday life; it is a temporary interlude, satisfying in itself and ending there... [54]

If media consumers derive various gratifications from media content according to individual needs or wants, surely individual motivation must affect not only choice of content but also the retention of it. In other words, if people really seek information from news (as opposed to other gratifications) they might be expected to retain more information than those who seek other gratifications. Gantz has documented this in a study which concluded that TV news viewers classified as "information seekers" retained more news than did casual viewers or those seeking recreation. He says: "More generally, the data suggest that strength of media effects is a function of their consistency with the dominant set of gratifications sought."[55]

Thus, the Stephenson point about the Self-enhancement, entertainment value of news, and Gantz's point about dominant gratifications sought, both are consistent with the view that news may serve the Unique Need to the detriment of the General Need for citizenship information.

One additional observation: since news is symbolic communication, it necessarily must present an abstracted world reality which largely is inaccessible to the media consumer. To that extent the real world is no different from a fictional, fantasized world. Most of the people, places and events referred to in a news story are as removed from the actual participation of the media consumer as are those of novels and fairy tales. After all, a news story is still a "story." It is all subjective experience, left largely to the media consumer to make of it what he will. Clearly, using news to become informed is only one such gratification, and it may not even be the major one.

C. Media Need. What difference does it make to the news media if the real audience for news--particularly hard news of public affairs--is small? Upon close examination, it makes very little difference.

To be sure, all mass media need audiences, to some extent the larger the better. That translates as saleable audiences, not necessarily as large news audiences. So long as the Penny Press philosophy continues to be profitable, that is, so long as the media can amass audiences which attract sufficient advertiser response, that is all that really matters.

Newspapers ought to be the most sensitive to the real audience for news, since ostensibly news is their focus and primary concern. Newspapers, indeed, do provide a large volume of news--more than any other medium. Still, their content is mostly advertising, 65% or so on the average. In terms of treatment and display, the news plays a poor second fiddle to the advertising. Content analysis studies show a considerable amount of hard news, but also a good deal of soft news, feature material, and non-time-dated "utility" information. A cynic might observe that on many newspapers all this "news" is just so much filler to separate the ads, and that the first loyalty of newspapers is not to their news audience but to their advertising audience.

Ah, but advertising, like news, is multifunctional. Advertising is news too--news of the marketplace--and as a 1976 study by Carrell, Grotta and Larkin points out:

> ...recent research suggests strongly that consumers do not make the same content distinctions that the media make. The audience seems to consider all content in the media as "information," and distinguish between content more on the basis of its usefulness to them--not whether we classify it as "news" or "advertising."[56]

What irony, if it turns out that readers in fact derive more utility from the 65% advertising than the 35% "news" in newspapers! (Maybe this explains to some extent why readers prefer newspapers with advertising than newspapers without advertising, and why so many all-advertising "shoppers" are successful.) After all, newspapers are not the No. 1 source of news (according to Roper), but they are the public's favorite advertising medium, according to the American Association of Advertising Agencies.[57]

Insofar as political news is concerned, the same thing may hold true for television. Patterson and McClure say bluntly that TV commercials by presidential candidates contain substantially more issue content than do network newscasts. For people who pay little attention to the newspaper, "advertising serves to make these poorly informed people substantially more knowledgeable." This is "primarily because network campaign news contains so little meaningful information."[58]

The limitations of television news are recognized by most everybody, except perhaps the promotion departments of stations and networks. Certainly the top TV news people, themselves, have no hesitancy in admitting their medium's limitations. Av Westin, executive producer of ABC's nightly newscast in 1971 once said: "I know what we have to leave out and, if people do not read newspapers, news magazines and books, they are desperately misinformed."[59]

Walter Cronkite has said that, "Actually, the problem is that we do such a good job, such a slick job in our presentation of the news that we have deluded the public into a belief that they are getting all they need to know from us."[60] But he added that in some communities newspapers don't give their readers any more than they can find on the tube. "A slick featurized makeup in newspapers almost defies the average reader to get the news."[61]

Many newspaper executives realize the need for more self-examination. After listening to several focus group interviews recently, Detroit Free Press editor Joe Stroud said: "We learned a little humility...a lot of folks are having trouble paying attention to anything in the daily press, let alone the editorial page. Many readers don't understand what we are trying to do and we and others need to do some rethinking..."[62]

Good news coverage is costly for all media. There is a temptation to use less expensive forms of content which still will attract a necessary audience. There is an inevitable pressure to watch news budgets and to produce only that quantity of news which meets internal needs--tempered as that may be with pangs of professional duty and responsibility. Edward Jay Epstein has given us a vivid picture of how organizational needs operate in the case of television news,[63] and to some extent the same forces must act on the other news media.

It remains that as long as newspaper and television profit margins remain as high as they are (and they are considerably higher than the margins enjoyed by business as a whole), the major news media need not be economically threatened by the relatively small audience for news--as it is defined traditionally.

III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues, with what I suggest is a decent amount of theoretical and empirical evidence, that the real audience for news--as traditionally defined--is less than is popularly assumed. It is argued further that the political system--as it operates in practice (democratic theory notwithstanding)--does not require a large audience for news. The assertion is made that the individual citizen-media consumer consciously or unconsciously realizes the futility of being well-informed politically, and therefore uses news for more diffuse personal needs--needs and wants which are unique to the individual; in those areas of his life where information holding can make a difference, the individual truly may be well-informed. Finally, it is argued that the news media not only can survive economically, given all this, but that they actually make large profits as a result of it.

If all the parties involved are reasonably content with the situation, why should there be any concern? The answer is that the situation leads to, or contributes to, the following chain reaction:

(A) Crisis Creation. An uninformed and politically apathetic citizenry easily can be taken by surprise when problems which have been festering and developing slowly then explode into dramatic events. Then, and only then sometimes, do such problems become "news." Suddenly a crisis exists. There is a public outcry: "Why...How did we get into this mess?"

(B) Demands for Instant Solutions. Once public somnolence has been stirred by a crisis (e.g., energy, pollution--pick any of the current crises), there is a demand for action. After years of being conditioned by media entertainment programs to expect quick and easy solutions (tough problems can be solved in 30 minutes, impossible ones in two hours, maximum), the public puts pressure on its institutions to resolve the crisis with equal dispatch. Since this is quite impossible, this contributes to an unreasonable "expectation gap" and

(C) Lowered Institutional Confidence. The public feels it has been misled, misinformed; confidence is weakened in the news media as well as government, education, business, religion--indeed all social institutions. Feelings of powerlessness, apathy and alienation are fueled, and the cycle starts all over again.

The final consequence is a society which is increasingly unsure of itself, a society which is increasingly vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation, a society where the dual illusions of popular sovereignty and of a well-informed citizenry combine to create great potential for political chaos and even anarchy.

Maybe Michael Robinson is right: "As long as the economy holds out, liberal democracies get by--with or without political legitimacy."[64]

And if it doesn't...?

XXX

FOOTNOTES

1. Broadcasting Yearbook 1978, p. A-2.

2. This figure is cited by Les Brown in his column syndicated by the New York Times Service, December 6, 1979.

3. Advertising Age (June 5, 1978), p. 96.

4. W. R. Simmons data, as quoted in News Research For Better Newspapers, Vol. 7, ANPA Foundation (July 1975), p. 31.

5. Ibid., p. 31. Also see: John P. Robinson, "Daily News Habits of the American Public," ANPA News Research Report No. 15 (September 1978); John P. Robinson, "The Audience for National TV News Programs," Public Opinion Quarterly (Fall 1971), 403-405; and John P. Robinson and Leo W. Jeffres, "The Changing Role of Newspapers in the Age of Television," Journalism Monographs, No. 63 (September 1979), p. 9.

6. Elihu Katz, Hanna Adoni and Pnina Parness, "Remembering the News: What the Picture Adds to Recall," Journalism Quarterly (Summer 1977), p. 239.

7. ANPA Newspaper Information Service Newsletter (December 31, 1971), p. 1.

8. See "Facts About Newspapers 1979," ANPA (April 1979).

9. Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, Theories of Mass Communication (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1975), p. 30.

10. See Galen Rarick (ed.), News Research For Better Newspapers Vol. 7, ANPA Foundation (July 1975), 59-60.

11. For a summary of various studies reporting this, see John P. Robinson and Leo W. Jeffres, "A Cohort Analysis Perspective on 'the Death of Print' (Where Have All the Readers Gone?)," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Houston, Texas, August 6, 1979.

12. This particular estimate is based on a Harris poll, cited in U.S. News & World Report (August 19, 1974), p. 37.

13. "Facts About Newspapers 1979," op. cit. ANPA says in 1978 U.S. newspapers averaged 64 pages in morning editions, 56 pages in afternoon editions, and 196 pages in Sunday editions. In 1946 the figures were 23, 24 and 71, respectively.

14. Ibid.

15. News Research For Better Newspapers, Vol. 7, p. 27.

16. Ibid., p. 23.

17. Broadcasting Yearbook 1978, p. A-2.

18. "Changing public attitudes toward television and other mass media: 1959-76," in Television Highlights (Television Information Office, undated).

19. Quoted by New York Times Service, March 14, 1979.

20. Quoted by United Press International, November 8, 1979.

21. Reported in ANPA Public Affairs Newsletter (Nov/Dec 1978), p. 3.

22. Gallup Poll, May 1979, reported by Field Enterprises, Inc.

23. Gallup Poll, February 1980, reported by Field Enterprises, Inc.

24. Walter Lippmann, The Phantom Public (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 44.

25. For a fuller exposition, see Jacques Ellul, The Political Illusion, trans. Konard Kellen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

26. Lippmann, op. cit., p. 39.

27. For example see: Alexis S. Tan, "Mass Media Exposure, Public Affairs Knowledge and Black Militancy," Journalism Quarterly Vol. 53, 271-79; Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld and William McPhee, Voting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Jay G. Blumler and Denis McQuail, Television and Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); and John P. Robinson, "Mass Communication and Information Diffusion," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor (eds.), Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972).

28. For example see: Peter Clarke and Eric Fredin, "Newspapers, Television and Political Reasoning," Public Opinion Quarterly (Summer 1978); and Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976).

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37. Dean A. Ziemke and William D. Luetscher, "A Cohort Analysis of Partisanship Decline and Television Dependence," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Houston, Texas, 1979.

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43. Ibid.

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46. Ibid., p. 106.

47. Ibid., p. 108.

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